

What was Roosevelt's 'Vision of Europe'?

Written by Tatiana McArthur

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In 1928 the major powers of the world, most notably the US, UK, France, Germany, Japan, and Italy, signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact, essentially banning war and making it illegal worldwide.[1] Still in the optimistic hangover from the end of World War I, they hoped it would guarantee a lasting peace. However, as the events of the 1930's unfolded, the rise of Hitler and the onset of a global economic depression, it became clear that war would erupt again, whether or not a treaty banned it. The leaders of the time realised that the mistakes from Versailles must not be repeated this time around. Before the US had even entered the war, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) was meeting with European heads of state to discuss the planning of post-war Europe. His vision was one that emphasised some Wilsonian ideals, but were essentially different in the ways of implementing them.

In this essay, I look at how FDR's vision of Europe influenced the post-war planning. Firstly, I examine his hopes for Great Britain's role in Europe after the war. While Great Britain was clearly not as powerful as the United States, their power in Europe had to be maintained for peace to be possible. The continent had been torn apart during the War, and Germany was the main instigator. How to best deal with a defeated Germany was also of paramount importance. The treatment of Germany from Versailles was not to be repeated. Finally, the fate of the other nations of Europe must be looked at. The role of the Soviet Union played largely, and I will argue misguidedly, in the post-war vision. The importance of the economy and what type should be put into place factored greatly into post-war plans. Roosevelt's vision of Europe was one that was aimed at a lasting peace abroad, but also one that the US would not have to be a present watchdog.[2]

The formation of a trans-Atlantic alliance was of utmost importance to both the United States and Great Britain. This was seen into fruition with the signing of the Atlantic Charter in 1941.[3] This agreement essentially bound the two states together and laid the groundwork for a post-war peace, even though the US was not politically in the war at this time. It also stressed the American desire to "address not only the problems of peace, but also the causes of war." [4] Some of the most pressing issues that needed to be addressed were regarding the freedom of trade and economic stability. These were both instrumental to FDR's vision of a post-war Europe. As was clearly seen during the global depression in the 1930's, economic instability contributed to social unrest. The economic deprivation of Germany following the Treaty of Versailles led to the rise of Hitler; while FDR and Churchill had some disagreements, a Germany reverting back to a Hitler style foreign policy was something they both agreed must not happen again.[5] Thus, by ensuring that capital was still able to flow into the defeated country, they hoped to avoid a similar situation.

The encouragement of self-determination and decolonization were both key to the Charter. One of the primary aspects of British foreign policy had been the overseas territories, the most important being India. However, for an American version of Europe to emerge from the post-war rubble, people would need to be able to choose the government they deemed best. Naturally, it was assumed that democracies would spring up with this new freedom. The British agreeing to decolonizing and allowing this to happen goes to show to what degree they were willing to go along with the American vision of future world order.[6] Roosevelt had imagined that Europe would only be peaceful once the colonizing and non-democratic governments had been disposed of or reformed.

The final step mentioned in the Atlantic Charter was regarding the formation of a permanent organization to over-see the disarmament process and create a system of collective security. This was another attempt at the Wilsonian

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dream of a league of nations.[7] It was realised that a single state would not be able to monitor the entire world and that some overarching body would be needed to ensure that the previous principles in the Charter were adhered. Initially, Roosevelt was hesitant to agree to this. It would be straying from the isolationist doctrine that had played a key role in American foreign policy since Washington days. He did not want to repeat the mistakes of Wilson and attempt to entangle the American people in foreign engagements. Indeed, one of FDR's main goals throughout all the peace conferences was to ensure that the US was not going to be a permanent presence in Europe. However, when the time was right and America had willingly emerged from its long isolation, he became one of the main supporters for a UN.[8]

This leads into one of the keystones for Roosevelt's vision. He believed that the great powers of the post war era, the United States, Great Britain, the USSR, and maybe China, had to assume a leadership role and, in essence, be a role model for the other states of the globe. FDR labelled these as the 'four policemen'. [9] Instead of having a single state or body oversee and maintain peace worldwide, these four countries would act as the main guarantors of peace.[10] They alone would be able to have arms; other smaller nations, including France and Poland, would be required to disarm completely and be subject to inspections by the four. If the smaller ones threatened the international peace, "it could be blockaded and then if still recalcitrant, bombed." [11] Keeping belligerent nations and uprisings under control before they erupted into a world war three was the goal. Having four major powers spread out, watching their corner of the world, would hopefully keep the US out from too many foreign entanglements. FDR did not want a permanent US presence in Europe and saw Great Britain as the state that would assume the 'policeman' status for that sphere of the globe.

Following the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was forced to pay the war debts and consequentially thrown into economic turmoil. Resentment over the situation that the Allies forced on the Germans led to the rise of Hitler.[12] This sort of treatment towards the defeated powers could not happen again, but neither could they be allowed to rearm. A large majority of the State Department workers agreed that an unarmed Germany would have to be allowed to re-enter the global economy. Maintaining a degree of economic stability was seen as being vital to avoid another depression like the one during the inter-war period. The German people needed to be kept happy and have access to basic needs so they would not turn to the next generation's version of Hitler.[13]

The US State Department's plan of how to deal with Germany was considerably different from Roosevelt's. Instead, Roosevelt argued that Germany should be divided up into several smaller states. In 1943, he told the British Secretary of State for war, Eden, "We should encourage the differences and ambitions that will spring up within Germany...Germany must be divided into several states." [14] He argued for the unconditional surrender of Germany. Unlike the treatment after post WWI, the people of Germany would receive fair treatment from the Allies; however, this did not mean that FDR did not hold the German people responsible for the atrocities that were carried out by the Nazis. As he said in a response to a softer proposal for German treatment, "The German people as a whole must have it driven home to them that the whole nation has been engaged in a lawless conspiracy against the decencies of modern civilization." [15] At the Potsdam Conference in 1945, it was decided that Germany would be partitioned into four controlled areas: the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, with this partition, the displacement of many Germans took place and forced them into newly formed Eastern European countries.

This issue of how to organise the rest of Europe was also of primary importance. There was debate among the Allied powers over how these newly formed states should be divided, namely the size of them and where the boundaries should be drawn. This not only included the Eastern European countries that were inundated with new citizens after Germany's boundaries would be redrawn, but also the issue of France.

Roosevelt's feelings towards the French, at least regarding post-war talks, were chilly. While he'd harboured some distrust towards Great Britain, it was stronger with the French. When the American forces advanced into France, Roosevelt was sucked into the quagmire of French, wartime politics. Roosevelt and the US government had given backing to Vichy's regime and refused to recognise the de Gaulle Free French movement.[16] He saw him as someone who could raise the potential for a dictatorship in France. This strong dislike caused problems for the post-war planning talks. Without fully recognizing one of the main actors in the anti-Nazi movement, reaching a mutually agreed solution would be difficult to say the least. Indeed, Roosevelt would have preferred to keep de Gaulle from

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planning both the war and post-war plans.[17] Requiring the French to disarm, in that case being treated similar to the Germans, made clear their place in the new world order that Roosevelt hoped to achieve; they would not be on the same level as the US, Great Britain, the Soviets, or China. France was to become another state in Europe that needed to be watched over by the stronger powers.

Following the end of the War, the peaceful environment in which democracy was supposed to spring up was largely interrupted by the Soviet invasion. The speed and success of the communist movement into Eastern Europe was in part due to the misplaced trust that Roosevelt had of the Soviets.

FDR was under the impression that Russia would go along with the spread of democratic principles seen in many of the post-war plans. Operating under this assumption, he was prepared to leave the fate of Eastern Europe largely to the Soviets since it fell under their sphere of influence. Almost in repudiation of the lessons learned from appeasing Hitler, FDR favoured dealing Eastern Europe to Stalin in return for promises to stop its own empire building. Obviously, this hope and trust was rather misplaced. Rather than blocking Soviet spread, many of FDR's plans opened up the way for Stalin to move through and plan Soviet satellite states throughout the continent. In some of the meetings between the US and Soviet Union, Stalin was able to mislead the West into believing that he had the overall same outlook as them. Indeed, during an interview with Hopkins, FDR's diplomatic advisor, Stalin claimed there was, "necessity of there being a minimum moral standard between all nations and without such a minimum moral standard, nations could not co-exist." [18] Encouragements like this, empty promises and statements hinting at similar goals and mentalities, lead Roosevelt to imagining a Europe with a cooperative Soviet Union, a Soviet Union that would be willing to help police the rest of Europe. Roosevelt consistently ignored warnings from Churchill that the Soviets would not be convinced that the plan put forward by Allies was in their best interest.

What Roosevelt did do was continue to push an agenda that encouraged Soviet influence in the eastern bloc of Europe. This is most clearly seen with regards to Poland. World War II was finally triggered by the Nazi invasion of Poland. It would stand to reason then that at the end, Poland would be give back to rule by the Poles. Conversely, FDR was seen as betraying Poland during Teheran in 1943. While meeting with Stalin, Roosevelt assured Stalin that he would not put up objections if he insisted in keeping the half of Poland and the Baltic States ceded to the Soviets by Hitler.[19] This concession heavy stance towards the growing power of Russia put more emphasis on appeasing Stalin than it did on ensuring that the new countries formed would be able to exercise the self-determination that the Atlantic Charter had promised. He had hoped that by giving Russia what they wanted, they would be able to avoid the mess that had happened after Versailles; the United Nations would be able to control a belligerent Russia.

The final aspect of Roosevelt's European vision I wish to look at deals with the economic motives. Economic unity in Europe was seen as an essential part of the peace process, specifically the spread of capitalism. It was hoped that capitalism would bring peace and create a marketplace for capital to flow freely. This bond and interdependence would hopefully trigger some sense of reliance on one another and limit some of the economical motivations for turning to war. However, in order for this to work, all the countries of Europe would need to be able to have access to the free trade markets. As Roosevelt saw it, another section of the world that was open to free trade was beneficial to the US and therefore, some sort of post-war economic intervention was needed. The meeting at Bretton Woods in 1944 founded the International Monetary Fund, along with the International Bank Reconstruction and Development in order to aid the countries recovering from the war. The economy in Europe needed a kick-start, and FDR believed that these international economic organizations would be able to provide it.[20]

After the Depression in the 1930's, many industries, such as the building of aircraft, ships, and weapons, sky rocked due to the demand from Great Britain. To keep this profit flow open in the post-war era, a new market would have to be found. The rest of Europe provided the arena.[21] In the post-war years, the US was able to offer European governments the tools needed for rebuilding in direct exchange for gold or other hard assets. While this did wonders for the US economy, it consequentially bankrupted most of Western Europe and lead to the need for a new plan, the Marshall Plan, in later years. In any case, while Roosevelt did not want to be militarily responsible for the security of Europe, providing them with industrial goods and spreading capitalism was seen to be in the best national interest on the US.

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Roosevelt had a wide reaching and aggressive plan for planning post-war Europe. The formation of a strong Anglo-American alliance was critical for both parties during and after the war. For the United States, Britain was necessary in promoting democratic ideals and policing the states of Europe, something it was in a better geographical position to do. The signing of the Atlantic Charter in the early 1940's cemented the partnership that has continued up to present times. Roosevelt saw what an important role Great Britain would have to play if peace in Europe was to be achieved. Also, the treatment of Germany afterwards was important to the success for the entire continent. It could not be allowed to rearm, as it had during the inter-war period, but at the same time, the people needed to have access to daily needs. Partitioning Germany would ensure that an international presence could keep track of German activities. The rest of Europe, would be subject to the four 'policemen'. Much to France's dismay, they were included in this grouping. Roosevelt's major stumble in his vision was his misplaced faith in the intentions of Stalin and Soviet Russia. His vision gave them large amounts of power and cleared the way for Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe. While some of the goals were never seen into reality, the overreaching one of a society of democratic European states was. Roosevelt's vision has lasted longer than end of the war, and can now be seen in present day Europe.

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